

DECADES WITH ACADIA

Managing the Acadia Cinema in Wolfville, Nova Scotia is the Job of a Lifetime for Al Whittle

by Lisa Osborne

Al Whittle has it all: a job he loves and employers who appreciate him. He began working for the Spencer family as an usher at the Amherst Theatre in Nova Scotia in July 1947. After a brief spell in Charlottetown on Prince Edward Island, he was transferred to Wolfville, Nova Scotia to manage the Acadia Cinema on what he calls the "lucky date" of April 13, 1953.

Whittle was rather young to be a theatre manager but what he lacked in years, he made up for in enthusiasm. "At that time, most managers were in their late thirties and forties, and here I was, a young whipper at 21," says Whittle. But Gerald Spencer, then owner of the Spencer theatre chain, definitely picked the right man for the job because 45 years later, Whittle is still running the Acadia, and enjoying every minute.

Thanks to the Spencers, he is also preparing to fulfill a lifelong dream of watching a bullfight in Spain. He's flying to Madrid and then taking a bus tour of Madrid, Portugal and Morocco. The trip's a present from the family "in recognition of Al's first 50 years of service," says Brice Belyea, Gerald Spencer's son-in-law and president of Spencer Investments Ltd., the Saint John, New Brunswick-based company which owns the Acadia.

As the only theatre left in the Spencer chain, which was founded by Gerald's father, F.G. Spencer, in the early 1920s, the Acadia Cinema occupies a unique place in the family's heart.

Gerald sold all but two of the Spencer theatres—the Acadia in Wolfville and the Capitol in Middleton—about 30 years ago. It was not a decision that he took lightly. "Gerald always said that selling theatres was like selling your own children," explains Whittle. The 23 or 24 screens that Gerald sold (mostly single-screen theatres, and three drive-ins), went on to form the core of the Empire Theatres circuit.

Two years ago, the Spencers sold the Capi-



WITHSTANDING THE TEST OF TIME: Al Whittle and the Acadia Cinema (shown in 1989) have made a winning combination for 45 years.

tol, but they plan to keep the Acadia. "It's probably one of the finest independent theatres anywhere in eastern Canada. It has a great little track record and it's wonderfully kept up," says Belyea. "We wouldn't part with the business for anything, especially as long as Al's there to look after it. It's been a major part of the family history; it's part of our culture."

In fact, the Spencers are considering buying more theatres. Belyea explains, "We don't know exactly where we're going with it at the moment but we're doing a little bit of a study in the province of New Brunswick to see where there might be an opportunity."

"If we could roll the clock back 20 years and have a crack at Al, we'd bring him over here and do something for sure."

The Spencers are very vocal with their appreciation of Whittle's work—they even took out advertisements in the local newspapers to commemorate his golden anniversary at the company.

Opened as an opera house in 1900, the theatre was renamed the Orpheum in 1925. It remained the Orpheum until 1947 when it was demolished and replaced with the Acadia. Built as a single-screen theatre, the Acadia was twinned in 1986 and acquired a third screen last year. Its auditoriums vary in size: The largest is 190 seats; the medium-sized cinema is 120 seats; and the newest build, which regular patrons call the "intimate theatre," is 80 seats.

All three auditoriums are equipped with mono sound systems but the company is considering upgrading to surround sound. Seating in the two older theatres was reworked three years ago, increasing the spacing between rows to 40 inches and providing more leg room. The third theatre's only one year old.

For a relatively small venue, the Acadia gets a great selection of movies. Whittle explains, "The film distribution people refer to us as 'cosmopolitan,' and with the university here, they tend to be very kind to us and give us many of the first-run movies—as many as we can take. For a little town of 3,300 population (and the university is 3,400), we are now entering our eleventh week with 'Titanic,' which is an all-time record. Our previous record was five weeks with 'Forrest Gump.'"

Wolfville residents receive a diet of art films as well as Hollywood mainstream movies, thanks to the university's film society which gives a presentation at the Acadia on every second Thursday.

The Acadia has strong ties to the university. In addition to helping out with the alumni association, Whittle has worked in the university dining hall for 38 years.

Even the theatre's ticket pricing is structured with the university in mind. The Acadia's "cheap night" is Wednesday, rather than Tuesday, because there are fewer evening classes at the university on Wednesdays. Movie tickets